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ABSTRACT

Recent provincial educational policy in British Columbia (Canada) supports inclusion of special needs children in the regular classroom and a philosophy of individualized education for every child. These policies have considerable impact on teachers in isolated rural schools. A survey of 32 teachers and 100 student teachers in rural elementary schools solicited ratings of the importance of 46 factors affecting integration of children with special needs into a rural classroom. Respondents rated every factor as important or very important. Experienced teachers were most concerned about the extent of funding for special needs students, availability of teaching assistants and other forms of support, and methods used to identify special needs children. Student teachers were most concerned about support services and personnel and the adequacy of preservice and inservice training in aspects of special education. A chart compares geographic, climactic, and population features of British Columbia and Vermont. Appendices contain a map and profiles of six small rural schools in British Columbia. (SV)

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THE IMPACT OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS ON RURAL TEACHERS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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INTRODUCTION

Historically Speaking

In May of 1985 the Division of Special Education, Schools Department at the British Columbia Ministry of Education published a document entitled Special Programs: A Manual of Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines. At this time the B.C. government stated that as a matter of public policy, every child is entitled to an education. Furthermore, "each school board was required to provide the basic educational program in a variety of settings, using teachers on either regular or special assignment" (p.1). The definition of integration centered around entry into a "constellation of alternative programs" within the traditional school system. (The Royal Commission, 1988). Change was imminent.

In 1992 the influence of Early Childhood Education reverberated through British Columbia with the development of the Primary Program Resource Document. The major premise of this educational initiative is individualization. Every child is a unique individual who is encouraged to progress at his or her own rate. According to this paradigm, individualization is the key to optimal learning and the total development of the child.

Within this theoretical paradigm for inclusion, the teacher is considered a part of a collaborative team of professionals at the school-based and the district-based level. This collaborative model is intended to support regular classroom teachers as they integrate children with special needs with their peers and adapt instructional programming to meet the individual needs of all students.

Research

Although the changes discussed have taken place over the last 8 years it has only been since 1990 that inclusionary practices have been nurtured through monetary support offered to the school boards via the Ministry of Education and through the highlighting of stellar teaching activities involving children with special needs. Thus the impact of implementing these appropriate supportive practices on teachers has been immediate and a province wide phenomenon. Two surveys issued by the Greater Victoria Primary Teachers' Association (1991) and the B.C. Teachers' Federation (1992) have been successful in eliciting teacher responses regarding inclusionary practices in

their classrooms. Both surveys identified inservice needs and the necessity for more extensive collaboration with concerned professionals.

According to the content analysis work of Collen Capper (1992), additional factors which effect the inclusion of students with disabilities into a classroom centers on (a) the lack of expert input into the services, (b) the weak political influence poor families have on integration practices, (c) lack of models demonstrating integration, (d) population sparcity, and (e) cultural variables.

Recognizing the challenges rural educators face when working with children with special needs our presentation today will focus on the issue of delivering equal school services and ensuring equal educational opportunities to areas with thinly scattered populations. Our presentation will address the following questions:

How do ecological factors, occupational, sociocultural factors effect inclusionary practices in the rural schools?

What factors did the rural teachers of British Columbia view as being of central concern to their effective inclusionary practices?

What are the emerging imperatives for future research resulting from our survey?

RURAL DEFINITION

Definitions of rural contained in the literature use the term "rural" in at least three different ways (Bealer, Willits & Kuvlesky, 1965). These are:

1. ecological - relating to place of residence with particular attention to population size, density and degree of isolation.
2. occupational - farming versus other occupations.
3. sociocultural - differentiating between attitudes and behavior in rural and urban communities.

For the purpose of defining rural in B.C., distance and degree of isolation are predominant features. In rural Vermont, occupational and sociocultural factors appear to be more characteristic.

GEOGRAPHIC COMPARISONS BETWEEN BRITISH COLUMBIA AND VERMONT

Any analysis of the factors that influence the integration of children with special needs into rural schools necessitates an understanding of the geography of the region. For this presentation comparisons will be made between Vermont and British Columbia. Table 1 shows some comparisons.

Table 1

Geographic comparisons of B.C. and Vermont

Feature	**British Columbia**	**Vermont**
Area	366,255 sq. miles (including 6,976sq. miles of inland water)	9,609 sq. miles (including 333 sq miles of inland water)
Population	3,000,000	535,000
Urban/metro	2,000,000 or 66%	181,900 or 34%
	8 persons/squ. mile	53 persons/squ. mile
Mountains	Five successive ranges running north/south with the Coastal Range beginning immediately at the coast	One range divides the state into eastern and western sections (the Green Mountains) four other land regions are present.
	Highest elevation 15,300 feet	Highest elevation 4,393 feet
Rural regions	Mountain plateaus and/or coastal fiords and small islands	Five regions which include farms, forest and tourist areas
Latitude	49° N - 60° N	49° N - 42° 30' N
Climate	Extremely cold in the north and wet on the coast	No extremes of temperature - warm summer and cool winter

The two areas are quite different geographically with B.C. having a large northern region, coastal truncated fiords and islands and four other north/south mountain ranges. B.C. is nearly 40 times as large as Vermont. Vermont has only one continuous mountain range dividing the state from north to south, and four other main land regions. The B.C. climate has extremes of cold in the north and high rainfalls on the coast. The Vermont climate is far less extreme.

In order to give the reader a concrete appreciation for the British Columbia rural experience the authors have included descriptions of six schools in the province Atlin on the Yukon border, Blue River in the North Thompson River area, Crawford Bay in the East Kootenays, Prespatou in north eastern B.C., Surge Narrows in the Gulf Islands, and Tatla Lake in the Cariboo in central B.C. Despite the geographic and climatic differences, rural teachers in Vermont and British Columbia can expect to face many of the same challenges when integrating children with special needs into the classroom. (refer to Appendix A).

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS FROM B.C. STUDY

The study conducted in B.C. involved a survey of 32 rural teachers and 100 elementary student teachers. The participants were asked to rate the importance (1 very important-- 2 ---3 important--- 4--- 5 not important) of 46 different factors that effect the integration of children with special needs into a rural classroom. Both student teachers and rural teachers considered that every factor was important (average rating 1.14 - 2.64). No factor received an average rating below 2.64. Table 2 shows the ten most important factors as indicated by the rural teachers and the student teachers.

Table 2

The Factors that are most important for the successful integration of children with special needs into a rural classroom.

Important Factor in Integration	Teacher rank order #	St. teacher rank order #
The availability of teaching assistants	1	3
The funding that the classroom, school and district receive for Special Needs students	2	2
The type of Special Needs children that are serviced	3	28
The types of support services and personnel available to the school	4	1
The method used for allocating extra funding for Special Needs students	5	8
The way these children are accommodated within the school setting	6	13
The methods used to identify children with Special Needs	7	40
Whether assistants are full or part time	8	34
The area the teacher feels he/she has adequate training - gifted children	9	19
The type of support the teacher/principal would like to receive at the class or school level	10	18

The student teachers ranked five other items as amongst the ten most important factors that were not in the ten most important factors listed by the teachers. The factors were rank ordered as:

#4 Adequacy of training in behavior disorders
#5 The need for further professional development
#6 The type of pre service training in the area of special education
#7 Adequacy of training in reading difficulties
#9 Adequacy of training in hearing impairments

As might be expected the student teachers were more concerned with their training to handle children with special needs than were the experienced rural teachers. The teachers were more concerned with the methods used to identify children with special needs and whether their teaching assistants would be full or part time.

Table 3 outlines the factors that teachers and student teachers considered were slightly less important for the effective integration of special needs students.

Table 3
The factors considered to be less important for the successful integration of children with special needs into a rural classroom.

Less Important Factor in Integration	Teacher rank order #	St. teacher rank order #
The composition of a school based team	45	30
The frequency of team meetings	44	46
The specialized training the teacher has received in special education	43	23
The specialized assessment tools used	42	45
The composition of District team	40	44

The data shows that rural teachers and student teachers perceive the school based and district support teams as less important to successful integration than several other factors. These results are in direct contradiction to the results from the Primary Teachers survey in Victoria School District. The Primary Teachers indicated that the support teams were an extremely valuable aspect of the integration process. Perhaps it is indicative of the rural reality where in small isolated communities the classroom teacher is the only person really knowledgeable about the individual child. The importance of specialized training (rural teachers ranked it as #43 and student teachers ranked it as #23) substantiates the previous data included in Table 2 where student teachers consistently gave training concerns high priority.

SUMMARY

As we have noted in these investigations, the rural classroom teachers must shoulder the daily challenge of instructing rural children with special needs. In the next phase of our research, we hope to ascertain what strategies rural teachers in B.C, employ when working with children with special needs and the sufficiency of their own teacher preparation in this area. We also hope to gain a clearer perception of their attitudes towards children and a more refined understanding of rural teacher's definitions of support. With this knowledge we will be better able to inject pedagogical relevance into our programs at the post-secondary level.

Teachers must have the self-confidence which will allow them to provide specialized services and challenging programs for children with special needs. Therefore, university programs need to instill confidence in teachers regarding their own ability to learn and encourage teachers to believe in turn that:

- all children can learn
- varied opportunities for learning can be provided within individual rural classrooms
- Rural teachers are supported by the people who count: other teacher, children with special needs, and the parents of these children...

The following poem captures the rural spirit and the appreciation and support of a rural parent for a dedicated rural teacher (cited in Bandy & Spizawka, 1993).

A Poem
From a rural parent to a rural teacher
(with thanks to D.M.)

You liked this little place
Rustic, rural (backwoods).
Though often silly, a touch of frontier ethnic.
You cared about its future,
Though caring wasn't in your job description.

You walked that fine line
Between the Hatfields and McCoys.

You made learning fun.

School was open. For parent, sports,
Clubs, organizations, and groups.
And you were there.

The curriculum? Oh, you did fine, I guess.
Hard to judge.

But where it's really important
Example, inspiration, motivation and work,
You excelled.
Our children were led, not bossed.

The final "scene" at the last school play,
The children presenting their parting gift,
Summed it up.
Surrounded by respectful, attentive
And yes, loving students
To share a bond.

A very rare thing
in the finest sense

Truly...A Teacher

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Appendices

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Atlin B.C.

Location: Atlin is located in the north west corner of British Columbia at 59 degrees north latitude. The winter population of the town and district is 300. The nearest town is Whitehorse in the Yukon with a population of 9,000. Atlin Lake is 100 km long with the spectacular Teresa Island Mountain in the center of the lake. To get to Atlin you must travel on gravel roads from Whitehorse, Yukon.

History: Atlin is a historic gold mining town. The first gold was found by Fritz Miller and Kenneth McLaren on Pine Creek in 1898. A gold rush boom town arose north of the present site. There is still gold to be found around Atlin. The first school was built in 1902.

Services: Atlin is a tourist town in the summer with cabins and camp sites on the lake. There is a fire hall, two gas stations, two stores and a community center. The historic grave yard tells a story of the history of Atlin.

Climate: Typical northern cold, long, hard winter (minus 60 degrees can be expected). Travel by road in the winter is good with four wheel drive vehicles. All travellers must carry winter survival equipment with them.

School: There is one school in Atlin with kindergarten to grade 9. There are 63 students, 4 full time teachers and a First Nations home/school coordinator. Atlin School is in the Stikine School district with school board offices in Dease Lake 250 km south by plane. Children may travel to school on skiis in the winter.

Blue River B.C.

Location: Blue River is located in the central portion of British Columbia on the North Thompson River. The population of the town and district is approximately 400. The nearest community is Avola with a similar population Blue River is a railway stop on the Edmonton line. It is on the east side of Wells Gray Park and therefore separated from the main population of Williams Lake by a mountain range.

History: Blue River was first explored in 1874 when the survey crew was looking for a pass for the railway. The first school was built in 1917. It is presently a highway stop and logging site.

Services: There is a general store/gas station and truck-stop highway restaurant.

Climate: Blue River is situated in the interior rain forest or wet belt that exists around the Bowron Lake district. It is at latitude 52 degrees North. There is a heavy snowfall in the winter.

School: There is one school in Blue River with kindergarten to grade 7. There are 51 students, 2 full time teachers and a half-time primary assistant. Blue River is in the North Thompson School District with the board offices in Clearwater 110 km away.

Crawford Bay B.C.

Location

Crawford Bay is located in the south east corner of British Columbia on the east side of Kootenay Lake. Crawford Bay is at the end of the road and the site of the ferry dock across the lake from Balfour. The population of the town and district is 400 in the winter. The nearest town is Creston on the south end of the lake. Kootenay Lake lies between the Purcell and Selkirk mountain ranges.

History: Homesteaders came to the area in the early 1900's. The first school was built in 1910. The first Fall Fair where farm produce was sold was in 1911. Before the road was built Crawford Bay was a ferry stop for the paddle-steamers that crossed the lake. The area has now become a summer resort area with cabins and camp-sites on the lake.

Services: All the services needed to support a summertime community.

Climate: Cold winters with heavy snowfall. The road to Creston is generally kept open in the winter but winter tires are essential.

School: There is one school in Crawford Bay with kindergarten to grade 12. There are 122 students, 5 full time teachers and 3 assistants. The school is in the Creston-Kaslo School District with the board offices in Creston 80 km south.

Prespatou B.C.

Location: Prespatou, a farming community, is located in the northeast corner of British Columbia. The population of the town and district is approximately 400. It is a Mennonite farming community with very strong religious beliefs. Children are not allowed any audio-visual materials. Families are large (often 12 children) and any special needs children are hidden and do not attend school.

The nearest town is Fort St John which is 200 km away with a population of 9,000. Fort St John is the center of the northern B.C. prairie on the border of Alberta. It is situated on the Peace River which flows north into the Hudson Bay. Fort St John is well serviced by air from Vancouver and Edmonton. The Alaska Highway passes through Fort St John as does a railway line.

History: The area was first settled by homesteaders after World War I. The population increased when the Alaska Highway went through the region. Since then the Mennonite community moved to the area and the town of Prespatou was formed. Only one non-Mennonite family farms land in the district.

Services: Prespatou has a gas station and several stores. It has a public library, post office and active Mennonite community center.

Climate: Typical northern prairie climate - cold, long, hard winters (minus 60 degrees). The first frost comes in August and break-up does not occur until May when there is nothing but "gumbo". Summer is a perfect growing season with the sun hardly setting in June/July. Fertile growing soil.

School: There is one school in Prespatou containing kindergarten to grade 12. There are 198 students, 8 full time teachers and 4 teaching assistants. The school is in the Peace River North School District with the board offices in Fort St. John.

Surge Narrows B.C.

Location: Surge Narrows is located on the north end of Read Island between Vancouver Island and the mainland (latitude 50 N). The community is scattered throughout Murelle Island, the Rendez-Vous Islands and Read Island.The population of area that the school serves is approximately 200. The nearest community is Herriot Bay on Quadra Island where there is a hotel, General Store and craft shop. Herriot Bay is a summer community with cabins and a recreational vehicle park. As the name indicates Surge Narrows is in a bay where Surge Rapids and Boat Passage meet. On the spring tides the current can reach 16 knots. All travel is by boat or all terrain vehicles.

History: The first school, a log cabin, was built in 1927 when the area was settled by homesteaders after World War I. The only occupations now are fishing and hand logging. There are several families who originally came in the 60's to avoid the draft in the U.S. Families still move to the area to get away from urban living. They are usually well educated and talented.

Services: There is a Government wharf at Surge Narrows which houses a small post office-store building. The community has built a community center next to the school which serves as a school gymnasium. One unpaved road leads up-hill from the wharf to the school.

Climate: Mild wet coastal rain forest with rough winter wind storms.

School: Most children travel to school by boat coming through Boat Passage and Surge Rapids daily. There is wharf space at the dock for their boats. In rough weather the children can be housed in a dormitory overnight. There is a two room school with grades kindergarten to 8. There are 28 students, 2 full time teachers and a teaching assistant. One of the teachers travels by boat daily from Quadra Island, the other lives on Read Island. The school is in the Campbell River School district with the board offices in Campbell River on Vancouver Island. A ferry runs from Quadra Island to Campbell River every three hours.

Tatla Lake B.C.

Location: Tatla Lake, a ranching community, is located in the center of British Columbia on the Chilcotin plateau. The tiny population has fluctuated over the years. As you drive by Tatla Lake all you will see is the Graham Inn. Presently there is a hydro relay station at Tatla Lake with a maintenance crew stationed there. The nearest community is Alexis Creek 120 km away with a population of about 500. There is one general store/gas station/post office/pub in Alexis Creek. There is also a community center. Both Tatla Lake and Alexis Creek have a large First Nations population.

History: The first school was built in 1924 as a one room school for the trapping, ranching community. Tatla Lake was on the wagon trail that the first settlers used as they moved to the western Chilcotins.

Services: There is one store at Tatla Lake which is the general store, gas station, Post Office and liquor store.

Climate: A dry climate with extreme cold (minus 40 degrees) long winters with a light snowfall. The summers are dry and warm

School There is one school in Tatla Lake with kindergarten to grade 12. There are 71 students, 3 full time teachers and a First Nations Home/School coordinator. The school is in the Cariboo-Chilcotin School District with the board offices in Williams Lake 160 km away.